

Recognizing and addressing the consequential

by BROCK WEIR

In the grand scheme of things, I didn't grow up all that long ago ? yet, in many ways, it sometimes feels like that formative period took place in a rather different world.

Take, for instance, a typical visit to a chain restaurant that's been around for a while. I remember going into Swiss Chalet with my family as a child and being faced with what might seem like a curious question today. ?Smoking or non?? we'd be asked before being assigned a table, as if the two-foot riser the ?smoking section? was on would somehow negate the ill-effects of second-hand smoke, a concern that was rightly all the rage at the time.

Now, not only does the question feel a bit weird, the very idea of a ?smoking section? seems unthinkable.

Sometimes we might find ourselves just about to say, ?Don't touch that dial!? instead of telling someone to hold on for a minute or two, only to be greeted by blank stares from people who grew up with dial-less television se ? well, the phrase ?television set? itself might result in even blanker stares!

We might find ourselves ?flipping around? on the same device when we're not so sure what to watch on the aforementioned device, ?rewinding? something that has never even been in the same room as a VHS tape, not to mention ?taping? the very thing we might be rewinding.

At the end of the day, those are all highly inconsequential things, little anachronistic hangers-on that are easily laughed off before moving on.

But there are also things that are far more consequential that are harder to shrug off ? and ones that shouldn't be shrugged off at all.

My generation, for instance, went to elementary school in an era where Canadian history was taught with an awe-inspired reverence for our forebears and the development of this country that seemed admirable at the time. But this era also seemed to coincide with the part in our collective timeline when the first cracks in this formidable façade began to show signs of cracking.

In Grade 3, for instance, we had some occasion that has now been forgotten to take an elective course on Indigenous art, perhaps a variation on the Woodland style, that resulted in a tempera-based depiction of a religious icon. An intro to Indigenous art, on the surface, is not necessarily a bad idea if it leads to the appreciation of all cultures from a young age; but as far as ideas go, it's less great when you consider this course was taught out of a textbook by someone who was not of the background in question and, however well-intentioned, was not best equipped to handle the surprisingly nuanced questions of our class.

That same year, around the Christmas season, we were loaded into the gym to both learn and harmonize the words of the ?Huron Carol,? which was sold to us as a traditional piece of Indigenous music without any acknowledgement of its background as the work of Jesuit missionary Jean de Brebeuf with a very specific intent.

Yet, just a year later, bit by bit, we were introduced to some of the, shall we say, thornier elements of our collective history. We were slowly given vital bites of information we would need to facilitate critical thinking, such as questioning why the Huron were purportedly singing about the Nativity, or why the artistic cultural exercises we were put through that were treated simply as if they were just a tick on a checklist.

How different it is today as school boards form bonds with Indigenous leaders, elders and educators to form meaningful bonds with the up-and-coming generation ? and how lucky these students are to have such invaluable learning opportunities.

Yet, the students aren't the only ones being invited on an educational journey.

You'd thankfully be hard-pressed today to walk into a municipal facility without being greeted by some form of land acknowledgement in plain sight. More and more, throughout our communities, and even being flown by our neighbours, we're seeing evocative orange flags, usually with the poignant message of 'Every Child Matters' fluttering in the breeze. In Aurora, the same messages are now found on rink boards in every arena - a move that was one of the first in Ontario.

By now, one can only hope that most Canadians know what these messages mean and what the symbols stand for, but it never hurts to have a reminder. If, by any chance, one does not, it's also a great opportunity to ask questions.

In many respects, we have made great collective strides in recognizing the realities of Canada's history, warts and all, in the interests of Reconciliation. But as fast as those advancements came, and sometimes as rightfully furious as those who propelled them, it almost feels that we've somewhat plateaued in this collective road we should be on.

'Our children were harmed at unprecedented numbers,' said Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley earlier this year while dedicating the Every Child Matters rink boards. 'Across the country, there is still this mindset that there have been only 215 children's bodies discovered. When I hear that word 'only' I cringe; one, because the number is well over 12,000 and we don't hear about that in the papers anymore. It makes Canadians uncomfortable to hear about the rising numbers. 12,000 is where we're at. Justice Murray Sinclair talked about 50,000 to 60,000 children's bodies being unearthed across the country and, as you can see, the numbers are climbing dramatically. I have no words to express how hard that is.'

'I think about all the names we don't speak and I think about all the families that were fractured, and I think in my own family what it's like to speak publicly about this and it's hard. We have to celebrate the resilience of our communities, the refusal to let go of justice, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report helped us to remember that there is a right way to right the wrongs. We can't bring back the lives of these children. We may never know all their names and we may never know what gifts were lost in the world because they didn't get to live a full life, but what we can remember is to never press the repeat button on something like this again.'

This Wednesday, June 21, marks National Indigenous People's Day, held on the Summer Solstice as it's the longest day of the year.

Again, much has changed in the more-than-quarter-century since it was established in this country, but the drive behind it has not.

Next week, even if a small way, I hope you can find a way to move the needle forward just a little bit, recognize what's really consequential, and be a part of the collective path forward.